

**DEPICTIONS OF THE FORGOTTEN**  
***Yakshas and Yakshis in the Mahabharata and early Buddhist art***

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## INTRODUCTION

Ancient India was no stranger to a diversity in religious belief and thought, manifest through the myriad cults and religions that dotted the landscape. Within this effervescence, certain cults tended to lose their ground in the face of more established practices. The worship of *yakshas* and *yakshis*<sup>1</sup> became one such forgotten institution, demoted to a mere facet of religions like Buddhism or Hinduism. Given its status now as ‘a dead kingdom’<sup>2</sup>, scholarship on these divinities is limited.

The aim of this thesis is to revive certain aspects of this forgotten kingdom by focussing on the representation of yakshas and yakshis in Brahmanical literature and Buddhist art. The focus is on understanding how these beings were perceived and imagined by these larger religions to arrive at a conception of the popularity of this cult, and consequently, of the relationship between this local cult and the religions that assimilated it. This thesis will continually look at questions of representation, relationship between religions, and interpretation.

Taking the representation of yakshas and yakshis as its subject, the thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter studies their representation in the Epic text, the *Mahabharata*. As a context for the chapter, one needs to explore the shifting notions of yakshas within Brahmanical literature; since the yaksha cult did not have any literature of its own, the first literary mention is found in the *Rig Veda*. Scholars like A.K. Coomaraswamy<sup>3</sup>, R.N. Misra<sup>4</sup> and G.H. Sutherland<sup>5</sup>, who have worked on yaksha representation in Brahmanical and Buddhist literature and art, have alluded to a shift in the conceptualisation of this mystical being from the earlier to the later Brahmanical literary traditions, from the Vedic texts to the Epic; a shift that simultaneously sees a certain degradation in the potential and status of the yaksha, blurring and complicating the boundaries it shares with other beings and deities. While, the yaksha in the *Rig Veda* was a formless power, instrumental in the creation of the world<sup>6</sup>, by the later Vedic period, the yakshas were a class of demi-gods worshipped in *chaityas*; the figure of Kubera

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<sup>1</sup> Hereon, these terms will no longer be italicised, given their repeated usage.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase was used by Norman Davies in his book *Vanished Kingdoms* to label the many forgotten phenomenon of history that were neglected in scholarship. Refer to Norman Davies, Introduction to *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), 4-6.

<sup>3</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I and Part II* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Ram Nath Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Gail Hinich Sutherland, *The Disguises of the Demon : The Development of the Yaksa in Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: State University of New York, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, *Rig Veda* 4.3.13, which also matches the ability of a yaksha to that of a *deva*. Cited in Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 15.

also emerged in the latter period, alongside an equation of this class of beings with other demi-gods like *rakshasas*, *gandharvas* and *asuras*.<sup>7</sup>

Certain scholars like Misra have argued that the yakshas' conceptualisation in the Epics and Puranas was "fundamentally opposed to the Vedic concept of the primordial yaksha."<sup>8</sup> He says that yakshas had a non-Aryan origin, given the emphasis on idolatry, although certain Aryans chose to uphold it; later yakshas were given a lower rank because the worship could not be sustained within Vedic thought.<sup>9</sup> The temper of historical scholarship makes it difficult to accept the dated Aryan hypothesis, further evidenced by the fact that Sutherland, writing 10 years after Misra, makes no mention of a non-Aryan origin. However, even Sutherland marks the subsequent decline of the yaksha, paralleling this phenomenon to the yaksha's growing association with water, an element now relegated to the realm of the underworld; by the time of the Epics, the underworld was no longer associated with the higher abode of the *devas*, but with death and demons.<sup>10</sup>

With this context, the first chapter will look at how the *Mahabharata* yields a distinct image of the yaksha, who had a specific position and function. It will study the descriptive qualities of these beings as well as how they are positioned in the narrative to take it forward. It includes an assessment of the authority of independent yakshas named in the text. The chapter also analyses the confusions that arise in the conceptualisations of yakshas and other semi-divine beings. Broadly, it studies how the *Mahabharata* balances the image of the yaksha to retain its popularity, while assimilating it into the Brahmanical fold.

The second chapter studies the depiction of yakshas on the reliefs of the stupa at Bharhut, and stupas 1, 2 and 3 at Sanchi. It looks at the Buddhist perception of yaksha through art, and also dwells on questions of identification and interpretation. Within Buddhism, yakshas were represented in both texts and sculptural art. The mythology of the yakshas had existed since a time before the advent of Buddhism. Hence, the new religion worked to incorporate the myths

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<sup>7</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 17-20.

<sup>8</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 6. Theologically, Misra points out, the yaksha was styled as the source of creation, either as the material of creation or as the creator. In the Brahmanas and Upanishads, the yaksha was identified as Brahma, the first-born divine force responsible for creating everything else. (Also see Sutherland, *The Disguises of the Demon*, 50-52) Misra states that "it appears that Yaksha is either a self-born primordial deity, or the myth of his coming into existence is not mentioned at all and he is represented as the being who existed since the very beginning." (Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 22-23.) The yaksha is later replaced entirely by the figure of Brahma as the creator.

<sup>9</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 6-8.

<sup>10</sup> Sutherland, *The Disguises of the Demon*, 95-96.

in a manner that would appease and attract worshippers, while simultaneously asserting the supremacy of the Buddha. Buddhist texts and art, hence, crafted a certain dynamic between the Buddha and the yaksha, whereby the former both assimilated and overpowered the latter. This is pertinent in Buddhist stories like the *jatakas* and the representation of yakshas in stupas, suggesting a confluence between text and image, making it possible to study Buddhist iconography in conjunction with Buddhist texts to understand the myths and context. Consequently, one can identify several Buddhist tales and myths crafted as reliefs onto the pillars and railings of stupas across India.

During the lifetime of the Buddha, the *sangha* congregated around his very person, with the Buddha as the head, leader and principal authority, as well as the link between the monks and laity. The Buddha's death, therefore, left a void in the *sangha* and the faith of the laity, a chasm likely filled with the establishment of structures that could entomb the bodily remains of the founder to provide access to his continued presence<sup>11</sup>. These structures could also house relics of other personages, while some did not have relics at all. Hence, the stupa was an essential component of Buddhist worship and experience, explaining the significance of these structures at Bharhut and Sanchi.

The iconography applied to these sites was consequently symbolic to the worshippers and held significance within the Buddhist circles. Therefore, it is evident that the presence of yakshas and yakshis in this space provides them a certain importance in the eyes of the Buddhist patrons and worshippers, who came across them repeatedly during the ritual circumambulation. This explains why yakshas were often associated with other motifs that held a special significance within Buddhist thought and philosophy. This included the symbol of the tree, allied to which was the image of the *vrikshaka*, the lotus, the *purna-ghata*, among others. Yakshas and yakshis are frequently provided with supports representing mystical aqueous animals like the *makara*, the fish-tailed horse, elephant, lion or the flower of the lotus, suggesting an intimate connection of these deities of fertility with the life-giving Waters.

While scholars who have worked on stupa art, especially Vidya Dehejia, A. Cunningham and John Marshall, have identified several reliefs as representations of yakshas and yakshis, identification of these demi-gods is not a straightforward matter. This is a point mentioned by Alfred Foucher, who points to the uncertainties in identifying figures, especially given how

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<sup>11</sup> The idea of continued presence has been posited by Kevin Trainor in Vidya Dehejia, *Unseen Presence: The Buddha and Sanchi* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1996), 21.

yakshas and yakshis often resemble other figures. Furthermore, there are no inscriptions at the stupas in Sanchi to aid recognition of the sculpted figures. Even at Bharhut, where there are inscriptions, they are only restricted to the corner pillar figures, leaving a wide array of reliefs unidentified.

The other problem pertains to the uncritical dependence on Pali Buddhist texts to identify sculptural art. In one of her articles, Monika Zin questions the identification of Amaravati iconography based on Pali texts, such as the *Nidānakathā*, the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* or the *Jatakas*. Zin asserts that “these texts, from the 5th century, should not be applied without reservation to older reliefs;”<sup>12</sup> she points out how certain reliefs find possible correspondence in Buddhist texts in other languages. She suggests a reliance on the pictorial tradition, which requires greater scrutiny, and the acknowledgement that it is as valuable as textual sources.<sup>13</sup> Dehejia carries this argument forward by stressing the importance of oral traditions that were adapted and circulated before versions were put into writing.<sup>14</sup> However, she does often assume the popularity of myths inserted into the Pali canon;<sup>15</sup> in actuality, it is not always possible to assess the popularity of a myth as an oral tale, if at all it was the source for the iconography.

These are some of the questions that the second chapter considers while examining the sculptural art on stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi. It highlights the issues in the existing identification, while endeavouring to arrive at certain sculptural forms that could be seen as representations of yakshas. Here again, there is an attempt at underlining the how the yaksha cult was integrated into Buddhism.

This thesis looks for ways to recover the forgotten world of the yakshas. It aims to do so from the lens of two religions that had a more lasting legacy than the independent cult. It attempts to look for facets of the cult that managed to survive despite integration, and to assess whether the other dimensions were completely lost or reinterpreted in certain ways. The issues of assimilation, adaptation and representation form the framework for this inquiry.

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<sup>12</sup> Monika Zin, “When Stones are All that Survived: The Case of Buddhism in Andhra,” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 65, no. 1 (2012): 239.

<sup>13</sup> Zin, “When Stones are All that Survived,” 240.

<sup>14</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Dehejia often makes statements like, “It is curious that the easily “readable” and instantly recognisable cock and cat story has an inscribed label which reads Cat jataka, Cock *jataka*.” (Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 11)

## CHAPTER ONE: THE MAHABHARATA

As mentioned above, there was a continuous shift in the perception of the yaksha within Brahmanical literature. It is within this dynamically changing context that I look at the *Mahabharata*<sup>16</sup> to understand the status and representation of the yaksha within the Epic text. Although compiled as a single homogenous text, the *Mahabharata* was crafted over a large span of time, drawing especially from oral traditions. Dating of the text itself is an issue, with some scholars positing 300 BCE to 100 BCE, while others extending it from 400 BCE to 400 CE. The Epic likely drew from a myriad local traditions and practices spread over a vast space, and this is what makes this study of the representation of the yakshas so interesting.

When it comes to Epic Mythology, it is important to note that the conception of the different divine, semi-divine and demonic beings, whether Varuna, Shiva, yakshas or *pishacas*, is more or less identical in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, the *Mahabharata* contains the gist of the *Ramayana* within its narrative, suggesting a certain continuity in the mythology. Consequently, the *Ramayana* can be used to clarify the distinctions and nuances of different sections of mythical beings in the *Mahabharata*. Hence, I have occasionally referred to sections of the *Ramayana* to further the understanding of yakshas in the *Mahabharata*.

### Status

#### *Origin*

The Epics provide distinct origin stories for the creation of yakshas, who, unlike in certain Vedic texts, are no longer responsible for the creation of the universe. This development reveals a trend in the Epics and *Puranas* of imposing a “patently authoritarian religious and mythological basis”<sup>18</sup> to several Vedic deities who were relegated to the space of lower gods or demi-gods, like the yakshas. Both the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* style the yakshas as descendants of Brahma but employ slight variations in narrative: while the former makes them out to be the sons of Pulastya, born to Brahma,<sup>19</sup> the latter provides a more etymological origin, where Brahman creates the yakshas, alongside *rakshasas*, as protectors of the waters.<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> In this thesis, I shall be referring to the following versions of the *Mahabharata* text: John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009), and Johannes A.B. Van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975).

<sup>17</sup> Edward Washburn Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* (New Haven: Strassburg K.J. Trubner, 1915) 2-3, <https://archive.org/details/epicmythology00hopkuoft/page/n3>.

<sup>18</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 196.

<sup>20</sup> Sutherland, *The Disguises of the Demon*, 40-41. Also see the section on *Rakshasas* below.

*Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata* also specifies that the yakshas were formed only after the *kritayuga*.<sup>21</sup>

### *Declining status?*

There is a certain confusion over the immortality of the yakshas, a characteristic guaranteed in the Vedas. The *Mahabharata* specifies that the yakshas had claimed their immortality through a show of “manly (*dharmic*) action.”<sup>22</sup> However, the Epic describes episodes involving the death of yakshas at the hands of the Epic heroes, like Bhima and Arjuna,<sup>23</sup> and it also mentions the span of life of a yaksha.<sup>24</sup> This confusion likely stems from the negotiations that accompanied the transformation and subjugation of the yaksha into a being less capable than the great gods of the Epics like Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. An attempt at assimilating the yakshas into the Vasudeva cult can be found in the *Udyog Parva*, where yakshas and other gods and demi-gods are seen on the body of the Vasudeva.<sup>25</sup> The *Bhishma Parva* describes the worshippers of Krishna as including *rudras*, *ashvins*, *devas*, *gandharvas*, yakshas and demons.<sup>26</sup>

### *Inhabiting sacred spaces*

Regardless, the *Mahabharata* does not strip the yakshas of all their abilities, and these demi-gods manage to retain a high status within the space they are provided. The Epic points to several spaces that are considered sacred as they are inhabited by the gods. These spaces are occupied by yakshas as well, defining their sacred status in the mythology. For instance, trees often act as mystical abodes of gods, saints and demi-gods<sup>27</sup>, which are worshipped by humans for fulfilment of wishes, especially birth of children. In the *Vana Parva*, Satyawati and her mother embrace the *ashvattha* and fig tree to bear children.<sup>28</sup> Such instances evoke the identification of yakshas and yakshis as fertility deities. Hence, the forest makes up a significantly sacred space where yakshas can be found.<sup>29</sup> Certain trees, specially designated at *chaitya-vrikshas*, were considered sacred and were not meant to be harmed in any way as they

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<sup>21</sup> Johannes A.B. Van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.33.148 (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975) 504, <https://archive.org/details/mahabharata03buit>.

<sup>22</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 29. For instance, *Mahabharata* 3.157.42.

<sup>24</sup> *Mahabharata* 3.154.15. Cited in Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata* 5.129.5 (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009) 336.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 6.33.20, 363.

<sup>27</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 3.115, 187-88.

<sup>29</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 62.



housed gods, yakshas, *rakshasas*, *apsaras*, *nagas*, etc.<sup>30</sup> Divine groves of heavenly trees are often found on mountains, in the space lying between heaven and earth; one such sacred grove with an altar of Kubera is encountered by Yudhisthira during his journey.<sup>31</sup> The *Mahabharata* also holds mountains as holy places such as the Mandara mountain, which acts as the home of Kubera, who lives there along with his yakshas.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, wish fulfilling yakshas were said to reside in tanks, carrying on the Vedic association of primeval yakshas with lakes, rivers and water as the source of creation.<sup>33</sup>

### *Popular worship*

The yakshas were held in both awe and fear, and this elicited worship from the humans on both accounts. Yakshas were popularly worshipped for earthly pleasures, like wealth, health and children,<sup>34</sup> for immortality, restoration of youth and eyesight;<sup>35</sup> for instance, the water sent by Kubera through Vibhishana allows Rama and Lakshmana to see the invisible,<sup>36</sup> an ability that Yudhishtira similarly acquires through water in the *Vana Parva*.<sup>37</sup> Yakshas were also called upon for protection of cities, like the yaksha *dvarapalas* of Kurukshetra, or to clear people's names from the sin of killing.<sup>38</sup>

But yakshas could also be malevolent spirits capable of possessing humans by entering into them and rendering them confounded and insane, a condition called the influence of the *yaksha-graha*.<sup>39</sup> In the *Mahabharata*, it is mentioned as such— “The man whom the Yaksas enter in the course of time goes quickly mad; he is to be known as Yaksha-Grasped.”<sup>40</sup> The cunning nature of yakshas rested on their supernatural power to change their semblance, like the Dharma-yaksha who first presented himself in front of Yudhishtira as a crane. These spirits often appeared in beautiful forms, especially yakshis, because of which Draupadi was asked by Sudeshna if she was a yakshi.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hopkins, 77. Also see Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Hopkins, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Hopkins, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 90-91.

<sup>34</sup> Misra, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Misra, 152.

<sup>36</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.42.273, 754. Also see Smith, *The Mahabharata* 3.273, 213.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 3.129, 190.

<sup>38</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 159.

<sup>39</sup> Misra, 152. Also see Sutherland, *The Disguises of the Demon*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.37.209, 664.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 4.8.10, 252.

Yakshas were also feared for their strength, owing to which they often guarded the abodes of deities, Kubera included, and were called upon to fight when the need arose; the *Mahabharata* is replete with such instances when yakshas, often along with rakshasas and other celestial beings, formed armies to fight for the deity they were guarding.

The yakshas were specially worshipped by the *rajasik* class of people,<sup>42</sup> who were classified by their passionate nature; the devotees made up a specific group called *yakshanugah*, who were wealthy, handsome, strong and cheerful.<sup>43</sup> The yakshas were offered special kinds of flowers called *sumanasa* as they made the heart glad, and a specific incense called *aguru* that belonged to the second class of incense.<sup>44</sup> Yakshas had a special preference for flowers with different colours like red and white, for honey, spirituous liquor, dance and music, evidenced by the fact that Kubera kept the company of melodists Tumburu and Narada.<sup>45</sup>

There is also evidence of festivals in celebration of yakshas. For instance, the *Mahabharata* mentions a gathering in the Bhandiravana of Mathura where the *Nyagrodha*, the banyan tree, a popular abode of the yakshas, was worshipped.<sup>46</sup> In another instance, the Pandavas and accompanying Brahmins in the *Ashvamedha Parva* offered meat, sesamum seeds and flowers to Kubera, Manibhadra and other yakshas before digging for the treasure of Marutta.<sup>47</sup> The *Mahabharata* mentions several *chaityas*, *ayatanas*, *veshmas* and *bhavanas*<sup>48</sup> which can be identified as Yaksha shrines, like the Chandala temple that was decorated with images and bells,<sup>49</sup> (c 18) and the yakshi shrine at Rajagriha in the *Vana Parva*, where there was daily service.<sup>50</sup> The worship of yakshas was often associated with tirthas, such as the *Kaubera tirtha* for Kubera at the junction of the rivers Narmada and Kaveri.<sup>51</sup>

### *Appearance*

The Vedic texts make no reference to the material personality of the yaksha, except for one instance in the *Rig Veda*<sup>52</sup> where the yaksha is said to possess a beautiful form. It is assumed

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<sup>42</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 98.

<sup>46</sup> Misra, 99.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 14.64, 711.

<sup>48</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 88.

<sup>49</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Mahabharata* 3.84.105. Cited in Coomaraswamy, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 30.

<sup>52</sup> *Rig Veda* 7.56.16. Cited in Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 15.

that they are meant to be abstract like other Vedic divinities.<sup>53</sup> Later Vedic texts give the yakshas a more material basis, in that they could be touched, but they simultaneously emphasise their invisibility.<sup>54</sup>

In the same line, the actual appearance of a yaksha is usually absent in the narrative of the *Mahabharata*. However, they have a fixed form, almost anthropomorphic in nature, that is visible to everyone. There are rare instances involving descriptions of how a yaksha actually looks. One such instance can be found in the case of the yaksha-*prashna* episode, when the yaksha, who first appears as a crane, later reveals his true form, and he is described as “odd-eyed, big bodied yaksha, tall as a palm, fiery like fire and sun, unconquerable and mountainous.”<sup>55</sup> This, among other instances, signifies that yakshas were endowed with the supernatural ability of transforming themselves into other creatures, like into a crane, and Misra argues that this was often used as a mask to conceal their actual ghastly appearance.<sup>56</sup> Another description, again from the *Vana Parva*, is found after Kubera arrives with his yakshas to find out why Bhima had killed all the guards at his pool. The yakshas are sketched as such—

“Red-eyed, golden hued, gigantic and powerful yakshas, armed and girt with swords, counting ten hundred myriad, all very impetuous heroes, surrounded and waited on their king.”<sup>57</sup>

Yakshas were known for their beauty and strength, and the *Mahabharata* illustrates several occasions of misidentification of characters because they possessed these qualities. This happens in the case of Draupadi, who is asked if she is a yakshi by Sudeshna and Kotikasya. The former asks her if she was “a yakshi, or a goddess, a *gandharva* woman or an *apsara*.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, while in the forest, Kotikasya asks her whether she was a “yakshi, *danavi*, *apasara* or *daitya* nymph.”<sup>59</sup> Kirata, Sita and Ganga are other women who experience misidentification as yakshis.<sup>60</sup> In the case of Damayanti, she is talked about in the following way— “Not among gods or yakshas or men had such a beautiful woman ever been seen or heard before.”<sup>61</sup> The case of Damayanti is further interesting as later in the story, when she is wandering the forest

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<sup>53</sup> Misra, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Misra, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.44.297, 800.

<sup>56</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 148.

<sup>57</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.35.158, 529.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 4.8.10, 252.

<sup>59</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.42.249, 707.

<sup>60</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.32.50, 323.

as a mad woman, and encounters a caravan, the travellers ask her if she was a yakshi, *rakshasi* or a noble woman, and plead to her to protect their travels.<sup>62</sup> This implies the divine status of the yakshis, and also associates them with travellers, a link forged through the Yaksha Manibhadra, the protector of traders and travellers. Male characters are also confused at times with yakshas. A glimpse of Nala makes people exclaim, “Would he be a god, or a yaksha, or a *gandharva*?”<sup>63</sup> Hanuman is also mistaken as a yaksha for his form and strength.<sup>64</sup> Arjuna is confused as a yaksha for his skills in archery,<sup>65</sup> implying that yakshas were seen as skilled warriors, justifying their position as protectors of gods.

There are also descriptions that recall the *shalabhanjika* figure, where the *vrikshaka* could be a yakshi. In the *Vana Parva*, one finds the following lines:

“Who art thou that, bending down the branch of the *kadamba* tree, shinest lonely in the hermitage, sparkling like a flame of fire at night, shaken by the breeze, oh thou of fair brows? Exceeding fair art thou, yet fearest naught here in the forest. Art thou a devata, a yakshi, a *danavi*, an *apsara*, or a fair *daitya* girl, or a lovely maiden of the *naga* king or a *rakshasa* in the wood?”<sup>66</sup>

The description evokes the familiar motif of the woman with a tree, often associated with fertility, and frequently identified as a yakshi, who were worshipped for children.<sup>67</sup> However, as is evident here, the motif could be identified in other ways as well. It is also important to note the general absence of yakshis in the narrative; rarely any yakshi is ever named, and there are only indirect allusions to their form and capabilities.

### Individual Yakshas

The Epics and Puranas emphasised a rise in the identification of individual yakshas, a process that had vaguely originated in the later Vedic texts. The most important was of course Kubera, the lord of the yakshas.

#### *Kubera*

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<sup>62</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.32.62, 341.

<sup>63</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.32.52, 326.

<sup>64</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 331.40, 301.

<sup>66</sup> *Mahabharata* 3.265.1. Cited in Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part II*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I*, 32.

The emergence of Kubera occurs in the late Vedic tradition, but initially, he is styled as a *rakshasa* and a master of robbers. He is associated with acts of concealment linking him with *guhyakas* rather than yakshas. It is in the *Grihyasutras*, that he is awarded lordship over the yakshas, a position previously accorded to Agni in the *Rig Veda*.<sup>68</sup> In the *Mahabharata*, Kubera is alternatively styled as *Vaisaravana*, *Dhanapati*, *Dhanadhipa*, *Nidhipa*, *Vittapala*, *Vittesa*, etc.<sup>69</sup> The *Vana Parva* involves a gist of the *Ramayana*, detailing how Ravana banished Kubera from Lanka, from where he left for Mt. Gandhmadana, followed by yakshas and rakshasas, as well as his brother, Vibhishana.<sup>70</sup>

His role as the protector of wealth and the opulence of his court marked out his high status among gods. As one of the four *lokapalas*, Kubera enjoyed the luxury of a beautiful assembly hall<sup>71</sup> where he was waited upon by yakshas, *rakshasas*, *guhyakas*, *gandharvas*, *apsaras*<sup>72</sup> and *yatudhanas*;<sup>73</sup> Kubera's court was filled with *apsaras* who added to the celestial quality of the place with their dancing and singing.<sup>74</sup> His abode could only be accessed through a narrow path, resembling the way to paradise;<sup>75</sup> there, he and Manibhadra were served by 88,000 *gandharvas*.<sup>76</sup> Like other *lokapalas*, Kubera possessed a celestial elephant called Supratika or Sarvabhauma.<sup>77</sup> Kubera's wife was Riddhi or Bhadra, the goddess of wealth, and alternatively, Lakshmi, invoked only as the goddess of fortune who was related to all great kings, in this case to Kubera as one of the *lokapalas*.<sup>78</sup> Yudhishtira's wealth and kingdom is often compared to that of Kubera.<sup>79</sup> In the *Vana Parva*, one comes across the following description:

“...in a hue of gold, riding a lustrous chariot, the Lord Kubera, followed by Yakshas. The illustrious lord of riches had come to visit Arjuna, setting all of space alight, and of most wondrous quality.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 19.

<sup>69</sup> Misra, 61.

<sup>70</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.42.259, 730.

<sup>71</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 2.11.45, 87.

<sup>73</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> Hopkins, 165.

<sup>75</sup> Hopkins, 64.

<sup>76</sup> Hopkins, 159.

<sup>77</sup> Hopkins, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Hopkins, 68.

<sup>79</sup> Hopkins, 78. Also see pp. 126, 128, 714.

<sup>80</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.31.42, 304.

He is deemed one of the World Guardians in the episode, who comes to bestow his weapon on Arjuna.

At times, the abilities of Kubera are confused with other deities in the Epic. For instance, although Indra is traditionally associated with strength, in certain instances Kubera and Yama are identified with this quality;<sup>81</sup> specifically in the *Mahabharata*, Kubera is listed as one of the gods of power, along with Vaivasvata, Varuna and Vasava.<sup>82</sup> Like other gods, Kubera is described as capable of deceit, and transforming himself into animals at will.<sup>83</sup> Kubera heads the host of gods and demi-gods that arrive at Draupadi's *swayamvara*,<sup>84</sup> although that is a role traditionally ascribed to Indra. He arrives at the *swayamvara* in his capacity as a World Guardian, a role he reprises even during Damayanti's *swayamvara*.<sup>85</sup> Like other deities, Kubera also possesses magical weapons like the *Kauber*<sup>86</sup>, and the weapon of Disappearance which he gifts to Arjuna.<sup>87</sup> The Epic frequently styles Kubera, and other Regents, as *Bhagavat*<sup>88</sup> or *Bhagvan*.<sup>89</sup> Hence, despite being a yaksha, Kubera is provided the abilities and status of all the other gods falling below Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

#### *Other yakshas*

The *Mahabharata* makes references to yaksha Manibhadra on some occasions, who was alternatively called Manivara, Manimat, etc. He was invoked as the guardian of merchants,<sup>90</sup> and as the exclusive deity of travellers and traders. Yudhishtira worshipped him before retrieving treasures of Marutta in the Ashvamedha Parva. The *Mahabharata* states that he lived on the Svetgari and Mandara mountain, attended to by various yakshas with weapons.<sup>91</sup> Other yakshas included Pingala, Amogha, Stunakarna, Kimpurusha, and Nalakubara.<sup>92</sup> Arantuka, Tarantuka and Machakruka were invoked as they gave treasures and riches to those who worshipped them.<sup>93</sup> Stunakarna was charged with changing the sex of Shikhandini with his own, an act that won him the ire of Kubera; in the story, Kubera curses the yaksha to remain a

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<sup>81</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 61.

<sup>82</sup> Hopkins, 122.

<sup>83</sup> Hopkins, 63.

<sup>84</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 1.178.5, 69.

<sup>85</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.32.52, 325.

<sup>86</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 129.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 3.42, 170.

<sup>88</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I*, 27.

<sup>89</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 26.

<sup>90</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I*, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 80.

<sup>92</sup> Misra, 29.

<sup>93</sup> Misra, 156.

woman till Shikhandin dies.<sup>94</sup> The *Mahabharata* refers to a temple-*veshma* for yaksha Sthunakarna, which was coloured and washed, decorated with garlands, wreaths, garments and flags amidst scented incense; it had high walls, gateways and enclosures, which had drinks and dainties.<sup>95</sup> There was a *tirtha* at Kurukshetra for Arantuka, and a dip there was as meritorious as an *agnishtoma* sacrifice; he also granted people the boon of gold. Worship to Macakruka and Tarantuka, *dvarapalas* of Kurukshetra brought merit of a 100 cows.<sup>96</sup> There was a *tirtha* of a yakshi Abhirati at Rajgriha that helped remove the curse of *bruna-hatya* (foetus destruction or aborticide).<sup>97</sup> In one episode of the Epic, Boyu, an incarnation of a yaksha, guides Arjuna to the inaccessible Indrakila hill, where the latter fights Shiva and wins the *pashupata astra*; a description of the same can be found in the 9<sup>th</sup> century Indrakila inscription at Bezwada.<sup>98</sup>

### Relationship with other gods

As one of the many demi-gods, the yakshas share characteristics and linkages with other beings, that complicate the distinctions that exist between the different sets of beings. In fact, Misra has argued that similarities exist between the Vedic conception of demi-gods like *rakshasas*, *gandharvas*, *apsaras*, *pishacas*, etc and the later conception of yakshas, indicating that the latter evolved into its mature form by imbibing characteristics from the former.<sup>99</sup> This confusion is manifest in the names that are mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. For instance, Manimat is a the name of a yaksha, *naga*, a mortal king, a *rakshasa* who is friends with Kubera and whom Bhima kills, as well as a mountain; while Purnabhadra is a famous yaksha in other sources, the Epic mentions a *naga* with that name.

Other perplexities arise over characteristics and qualities. Both yakshas and nagas steal jewels, but while the latter rob any gem left behind on earth, the former steal only from the impure,<sup>100</sup> asserting an ethical hierarchy between the beings. These two sets of beings also inhabit the same spaces like the underworld, Mt. Mahendra, etc.<sup>101</sup> There are overlapping connections with other gods and demons as well. Yakshas are grouped along with *Usmapas*, a group of *pitras*, as worshippers of Vishnu.<sup>102</sup> The Epics group the yakshas along with the *pretas* who wander

<sup>94</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 5.192-193, 346.

<sup>95</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 90.

<sup>96</sup> Misra, 30.

<sup>97</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.33.82, 390.

<sup>98</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Part I*, 14.

<sup>99</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 31.

<sup>101</sup> Hopkins, 33.

<sup>102</sup> Hopkins, 39.

the earth at night.<sup>103</sup> When yakshas are found in forests they are often confused with *vanadevatas* who are seen as equally benevolent and fair looking.<sup>104</sup> While their association with *rakshasas* and *pretas* bring out the malevolent side of yakshas, the *Mahabharata* mentions that the yakshas that roam the forests with *kimnaras* and *kimpurushas* are milder and friendlier.<sup>105</sup> Certain deities also styled themselves as yakshas at various points such as Dharma in the *Varna Parva*, Vishnu as *Brihad yaksha* in the *Shanti Parva*, and Krishna claiming to be lord of treasure among yakshas in the *Bhishma Parva*.<sup>106</sup>

### *The subterranean*

As mentioned above, the Epics had pushed the yakshas into the realm of the underworld, where they cohabited with other subterranean creatures like the nagas and rakshasas. The descent of the Ganga episode in the *Mahabharata* points to this chthonic nature of the yakshas. In the myth, the search for the ritual horse leads the sons of king Sagara to dig up the earth and kill these subterranean creatures in great numbers. Subsequently, the former are reduced to ashes by the sage Kapila, which then have to be washed away (purified) by the flow of the Ganga.<sup>107</sup> What this story points to is that the violation of the chthonic beings creates a certain disorder in the world that needs to be rectified through divine intervention; it reveals the significant link that exists between the celestial, terrestrial and subterranean worlds, at the heart of which lie the yakshas.

### *Rakshasas*

There is an especially close relationship between yakshas and *rakshasas* who are linked foremost by a common genealogy. On being asked to protect the celestial waters by Brahma, the creatures that said ‘rakshamah’ became *rakshasas*, and those that said ‘yakshamah’ became yakshas (there is confusion over the etymology of the terms— *rakshamah* could mean keep, protect or guard, while *yakshamah* could mean venerate, sacrifice or gobble).<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, Ravana, a *rakshasa*, and Kubera, a yaksha, were half-brothers by the same father Vishravas,<sup>109</sup> and the qualities of the characters were used to distinguish the qualities of the yakshas and *rakshasas*. The yakshas were as kind and helpful as Kubera, who aids Rama, while *rakshasas*

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<sup>103</sup> Hopkins, 41-42.

<sup>104</sup> Hopkins, 62.

<sup>105</sup> Hopkins, 164.

<sup>106</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 28.

<sup>107</sup> Sutherland, *The Disguises of the Demon*, 36-37.

<sup>108</sup> Sutherland, 40-41. Also see Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 6-7.

<sup>109</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 46-47.



were evil like Ravana, who banished Kubera from Lanka.<sup>110</sup> The *Mahabharata* considered the yakshas as more pure than *rakshasas*, and many of the latter group were reborn as yakshas on doing worthy deeds; Ghatotkacha stands as an example in this case in the *Svargarohanika Parva*.<sup>111</sup> Rakshasas were sometimes referred to as *Krodhavasas*, who resided in the north, the quarter of Kubera, and were occasionally called yakshas as well.<sup>112</sup> They are both seen as guardians of Kubera but while the yakshas are red-eyed, the *rakshasas* are “like fiery smoke in colour.”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, both yakshas and *rakshasas* have similar tastes in food, whereby both desire meat and spirituous liquor.<sup>114</sup>

The confusion among the different characters also leads to what Sutherland has called a “rehearsal” of myths,<sup>115</sup> whereby two myths mirror the same narrative but employ two different sets of beings. For instance, in the *Varna Parva*, Draupadi sends Bhima to fetch flowers from the garden of Kubera in the Saugandhika forest which is guarded by yakshas.<sup>116</sup> The tale is reminiscent of a previous episode where Bhima was sent to collect lotus blossoms from Kubera’s pool but had instead encountered guarding *rakshasas*. *Rakshasas* are present in this case as well, among whom one is Manimat (also the name of a yaksha), a friend of Kubera, who is killed by Bhima.<sup>117</sup> Here, while it is mentioned that Bhima kills the *rakshasas*, the Pandavas encounter dead yakshas near the pool. A similar rehearsal occurs elsewhere where a *naga* and yaksha are confused. In the first case, Bhima is held captive by a serpent, whose questions have to be answered by Yudhishtira before his brother is freed;<sup>118</sup> the same theme is explored in the yaksha-*prashna* episode when it is a yaksha who elicits answers from the eldest Pandava.

### **Upholding *dharma***

Paralleling the conflict between *devas* and *asuras* in the Vedic corpus, the *Mahabharata* involves a recurring confrontation between yakshas and other Epic characters in order to evoke the principle of *dharma* and order; these interactions, nevertheless, do not place the yakshas on a binary between good and evil (as they do with the Vedic *asuras*), and assert a character that

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<sup>110</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 3.259-273, 211-213.

<sup>111</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 18.5.20, 789.

<sup>112</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, 50.

<sup>113</sup> Hopkins, 43.

<sup>114</sup> Hopkins, 73-74.

<sup>115</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata*, 202-203.

<sup>116</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.35.157-159, 526-533.

<sup>117</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.35.155, 517-18.

<sup>118</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.36.176, 561-567.

simultaneously upholds malevolent and benevolent characteristics. Bhima is often seen confronting yakshas, especially in the *yaksha-yuddha* episode, where he kills them in large numbers, inviting the disapproval of Yudhishtira, who dictates the immorality of his act;<sup>119</sup> these instances act as prescriptions on the *dharma* of a kshatriya. In the episode when Bhima kills Manimat, he is forgiven by Kubera on account of it being Manimat's curse. However, Kubera then goes on to counsel Yudhishtira to restrain his brother from impulsive acts that work against *dharma*.<sup>120</sup> Violent encounters with yakshas also point to another function of the yakshas whereby they help showcase the strength of the Epic heroes. For instance, Arjuna's strength is often measured by how capable he is of overpowering yakshas and other demons.

Encounters with yakshas that invoke lessons in *dharma* also occur in non-violent settings. The *dharma* of a king in protecting his subjects using all means, including the magical powers of Brahmins is portrayed in the story of king Muchukunda, who used Vasishtha to slay Kubera's *rakshasas*. When Kubera questioned his use of the powers of a Brahmin, the king answered that it was his duty to employ all his means to protect his kingdom.<sup>121</sup> On another occasion Manibhadra is used to relate the correct way of earning *dharma*.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, the *yaksha-prashna* episode stands as another example, where the Dharma-yaksha after holding the Pandavas captive in a death-like state, asks Yudhishtira metaphysical, cosmological and spiritual questions in exchange for their lives; the questions pertain to understanding the nature of *atman*, the *dharma* of caste and class, Vedic lore, etc.<sup>123</sup> This episode further points to the inquisitive nature of a yaksha, a quality highlighted in Buddhist texts like the *Suttanipata* as well.<sup>124</sup> All these cases stress the functional purpose of the yaksha in articulating and expounding the nature of *dharma* and kingship. The yaksha, either as a malevolent threat to human life, or as an inquisitive spirit, stresses the discourse on correct behaviour and kingly action; interestingly the Dharma-yaksha fulfils both these roles simultaneously.

The *Vana Parva* includes a multitude of these interactions between Epic heroes and yakshas. Aside from the interactions with the yakshas, one of the aims of the book, according to Buitenen, seems to be reveal the lawful character of Yudhishtira as the king of *dharma* by placing him in situations that require him to exhibit his morals and principles. For instance,

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<sup>119</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 3.156-159, 195-196.

<sup>120</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.35.158, 530-31.

<sup>121</sup> Smith, *The Mahabharata* 12.75, 610.

<sup>122</sup> Smith, 12.263, 646.

<sup>123</sup> Smith, 3.297-298, 242.

<sup>124</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 24.

when Draupadi calls for vengeance against the Kauravas, he preaches on the vice of actions based on anger.<sup>125</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that Yudhishtira is present in most of the instances of conflict, and is referred to as the law-wise king. In the yaksha-*prashna* episode, Yudhishtira exhibits his lawful behaviour by choosing to answer the yaksha's questions instead of disobeying him and stealing water from his property like his brothers.<sup>126</sup> He is also seen as the catalyst to teach others the path of *dharma*. Hence, when Manimat is killed, Kubera asks Yudhishtira to ensure that Bhima moves away from his thoughtless violence.<sup>127</sup> This suggests that the yakshas had a specific purpose of eliciting the principled character of the eldest Pandava. However, it is not merely the yakshas that seem to hold this function; at times, it is also carried out by other creatures like *nagas* and *rakshasas*. In the case of malicious *rakshasas* like Kirmira and Jatasura, the killing is justified by Yudhishtira as being the correct mode of action.

## Conclusions

The vast text of the *Mahabharata*, drawing from traditions and myths embellishing vast landscapes and extensive timelines, gives a very comprehensive account of the yaksha. The semi-divine status, distinct origin stories and devotion to the Vasudeva cult, all aid the assimilation of this being into the Brahmanical mythology, which simultaneously snatches away certain abilities while also imbuing it with certain dynamic capacities; the former is evidence of the shifting perception of the yakshas within Brahmanical thought, which conceived them quite differently in Vedic, post-Vedic and Epic mythologies. The yaksha, initially a local deity, had to be balanced in order to bring the worshippers into the Brahmanical fold on one hand, while maintaining the divine hierarchy of the Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma, on the other. The linkages existing between the yakshas and other beings imply an evident confusion within the *Mahabharata* of deriving from past traditions, like the Vedas, while creating distinct boundaries around what each divine or semi-divine being could do.

The way the *Mahabharata* presents the yakshas and yakshis, shows that these beings exerted a certain divine authority, manifest in the devoted class of worshippers, and rituals and customs associated with yaksha worship. These semi-divine beings were vested with powers, including granting fertility, and actively aided those in need, thereby inhabiting spaces allied with celestial significance. Bestowing yakshas and yakshis with these capabilities was likely an

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<sup>125</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.31.30, 278.

<sup>126</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.44.297, 801.

<sup>127</sup> Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* 3.44.297, 801.

attempt at appeasing and attracting those people who were more familiar with these local gods. Conversely, the maleficent side of the yakshas was meant to contain them in a rank lower than the higher gods. This is not to say that the *Mahabharata* was an overtly religious text, but that it did conform to a certain mythological basis that allied more with Brahmanical notions. Considering this Epic as a narrative text, then requires looking at these beings from a different perspective as well. They served a functionality that on the one hand helped develop the characters and establish notions of dharma. On the other hand, being cast as subterranean creatures, they helped bridge the three worlds of the heaven, earth and underworld, a feat most relevantly performed by Kubera, who was both a yaksha and a deity.

The personality and role of the yaksha is, hence, expansively, undertaken in the *Mahabharata*. Although the Epic yaksha is a lot more physically concrete than its former literary perceptions, the image of the yakshas and yakshis we get is, ironically, more or less devoid of a visual appearance. Leaving the rare instances which relate the yakshas with ghastly facades, what is emphasised in the text is their ability to deceive people by transforming into other creatures. They are indirectly referred to when they are confused with human characters, an identification that stems purely from a qualitative assessment, that links yakshis with beauty and yakshas with strength. Why this lack in the description of the yaksha's physicality exists is a question that requires analysis. What is equally surprising is the lack of importance given to independent yakshis, who seem to serve a very limited narrative function, which is as a way to assess the beauty of female characters. The general absence of yakshis forms another point for future inquiry.

If we are to see the *Mahabharata* as a popular text, the extensive presence of yakshas and yakshis speaks volumes about their significance in the minds of local readership. The Epic hence becomes a valuable source to judge the intricacies in the beliefs of the people spread over a significant part of the subcontinent. Comparing the representation of the yaksha in the *Mahabharata* with the rough inquiry into the literary evolution of the yaksha within Brahmanical texts, undertaken above, ascertains that the nuanced complexities in the understanding of the yakshas are in no way exclusive to the former but have pervaded the creation of their identity since the beginning. The *Mahabharata* simply adds to the complex perception of the yaksha within a system created and followed by diverse people.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE BUDDHIST YAKSHA

This chapter will study the yaksha iconography found on stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi, to understand how these beings were envisioned within the Buddhist programme, through their placement and linkages with symbols. At the outset it is important to note that stupas weren't the first instances of yaksha art; they were preceded by a number of extant statues found in Parkham, Didarganj, Pawaya, etc. These images exceed the stupa manifestations in size and detail, and the mellowed form suggests the subjugation of the yaksha as a secondary figure within Buddhism, a phenomenon explored through this chapter.

The other problem to consider is that of identification. While some sculptures at the Bharhut stupa are accompanied by inscriptions, the others, alongside the ones at Sanchi have no labels. Furthermore, scholars have often assumed the popularity of Pali literature, bringing me back to the argument put forth by Monika Zin, who questions the confluence between art and Pali literature, which was written later.

### **Bharhut Stupa**

During his tour of the western half of the Central Provinces in 1873-4, Alexander Cunningham chanced upon the remains of a stupa at the village of Bharhut.<sup>128</sup> Situated 200 miles northwest of Sanchi, the stupa initially stood at the crossroads of two ancient trade routes from Allahabad and Varanasi.<sup>129</sup> Built as a brick stupa in Mauryan times, the final form, with the circumambulatory path, stone railing and *toranas*, was arrived at between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.<sup>130</sup> What has been recovered include the lime-plastered dome (68 feet in diameter), the eastern gateway, and a certain number of pillars, crossbars and lengths of coping; much of this is now scattered across Calcutta, Allahabad, Delhi, and other places.<sup>131</sup>

According to Dehejia, "every pillar, crossbar, and coping stone of the Bharhut rail was covered with sculptural decoration on both faces."<sup>132</sup> While the corner pillars of the entrances bore images of yakshas, yakshis, *devatas* and *nagarajas*, identified through labels, Cunningham has identified similar figures on other pillars lacking inscriptions.<sup>133</sup> The stupa carries several

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<sup>128</sup> Alexander Cunningham, preface to *Stupa of Bharhut* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998).

<sup>129</sup> Upinder Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010), 100.

<sup>130</sup> Cunningham initially assigned the date to between 250 and 200 BCE.

<sup>131</sup> Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997) 83-84.

<sup>132</sup> Dehejia, 84.

<sup>133</sup> Cunningham, *Stupa of Bharhut*, 10.

symbols associated with yakshas, including the lotus flower, and the *purna-ghata*. Lions, elephants and *makaras* are sculpted in various locations on the railing and *torana*. On some pillars, flowers bear elephants, horses, monkeys or peacocks, while parrots and squirrels hang from branches and nibble the fruit, evoking allusions to fertility.

Donative inscriptions specify that these images were commissioned by donors, including women and nuns. For instance, while the Suchiloma yaksha was gifted by a nun, the pillar with Kubera was gifted by a “reverend Budharakhita.”<sup>134</sup> These donors, coming from diverse backgrounds, likely brought into the Buddhist programme several of these characters, who were locally or orally known, later to be integrated into the Buddhist Pali texts as subsidiary figures.

#### *Corner pillar figures*<sup>135</sup>

The following yakshas have been labelled at Bharhut: Kupiro (Kubera), Virudako (Virupaksha), Ajakalako, Gangito, Supavaso and Suchiloma. The two corner pillar yakshas are Chada (Chandra) and Sudasana (Sudarshana). There seems to be a strong link between the stupa and the *lokapala* system, which had enormous significance within Buddhist cosmogeny. For instance, Kubera was the *lokapala* of the north, and Virupaksha that of the south, and their figures are sculpted in the respective directions.

Kubera, who is meant to guard the northern gateway as the regent, is depicted with folded hands, a likely sign of his obeisance to the Buddha. Stylistically, the figure contains no characteristics which can be used to differentiate him as Kubera. The dwarf<sup>136</sup> below the sculpture has been identified variously as a yaksha, a *guhyak*, and a *nara*, creatures said to serve Kubera. While Coomaraswamy identifies *naras* as mythological creatures who resembled the winged Atlantes in iconography, he also says that yakshas were represented as Atlantes, who supported buildings and superstructures. These squatting figures are also seen elsewhere at Bharhut, like on the base of the Vessantara and Ajatashatru pillars.<sup>137</sup> There is an apparent confusion in the identification of these creatures, moreover owing to the lack of labels.

Leaving Ajakalaka, all other yakshas are shown with folded hands, symbolising the subordinate position of yakshas in Buddhism. Here again, there are no bodily peculiarities, and the figures

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<sup>134</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 108.

<sup>135</sup> Refer to plates XX-XXIII in Cunningham, *Stupa of Bharhut*.

<sup>136</sup> Refer to plate XXII, fig. 2 In Cunningham, *Stupa of Bharhut*.

<sup>137</sup> Refer to fig. 8 and fig. 70 in Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 13, 96.

resemble ordinary male figures. In fact, the figures of yakshas and nagarajas are similar, and can only be differentiated through the snake hood on the nagas. Suchiloma and Virupaksha are the only yakshas who can be identified from Pali sources, challenging the dependence on these texts.

### *Other manifestations*

Other depictions of the yaksha include bas-reliefs that are identified with scenes from the *jatakas* using the inscriptions. One inscription points to the figure of Bhagavato Mahadeva, whom Cunningham believes to be Makhadeva yaksha from the Sutano *jataka*<sup>138</sup>; Luders disagrees with the identification, as he believed that the title of Bhagavan could only be conferred on the Buddha.<sup>139</sup> Hence, despite labels, it is not always possible to correctly identify the scene or characters that are represented.

It is also important to note that the labels rarely match the textual name of the *jatakas*, which, along with other Buddhist Pali texts, were put into writing many years after the Stupa.<sup>140</sup> On the Vidura *jataka* pillar<sup>141</sup>, identified by Dehejia as such<sup>142</sup>, the inscription label reads ‘Vitura Punakiyajatakam’ after the two chief characters of Vidura, the pandit, and Punnaka, the yaksha. While it is possible that the titles differ due to the initial oral circulation, it also points to a certain caution that needs to be employed while identifying the reliefs.

The figures of yakshas and yakshis differ in no way from human images made on the Stupa. For instance, in the Vidura pillar, Punnaka cannot be differentiated from Vidura, neither in figure nor clothing. The similarity in the forms and clothing of yakshas, nagas, devatas and men, makes it difficult to correctly recognise the figures depicted on pillars and medallions without inscriptions, challenging the existing identifications by scholars.

Several of the pillar medallions have busts of anthropomorphic figures that resemble the yaksha images described above.<sup>143</sup> Some medallions portray dwarfish pot-bellied figures<sup>144</sup>, identified as yakshas, with lotus stems emerging from their mouths, that are somewhat similar to the Atlantes figures, and might have inspired certain reliefs at Sanchi.

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<sup>138</sup> Sutano *jataka* 3.201. Cited in Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 94-95.

<sup>139</sup> Heinrich Luders, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum Vol II: Bharhut Inscriptions* (Ooty: Government Epigraphist for India, 1963), 180.

<sup>140</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 106.

<sup>141</sup> Refer to fig. 72 in Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 97.

<sup>142</sup> Vidura Pandita *jataka* 6.545 in Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 105.

<sup>143</sup> Refer to plate XXIV in Cunningham, *Stupa of Bharhut*.

<sup>144</sup> Refer to fig. 8 in Sutherland, *Disguises of the Demon*, 31.

## *Yakshis*

The figure labelled as Chandra yakshi<sup>145</sup> is shown beneath what is identified as a Naga tree, standing on a creature that is half ram, half fish, which brings out a possible association with water. She is holding on to a branch, and her left hand and leg are around the trunk of the tree, evoking the imagery of the *vrikshaka* figure. The association with fertility is conjured not just through the blossoming tree, but also through the gesture of her left hand which seems to point to her pelvis.

Sudarshana yakshi<sup>146</sup> is shown below a lotus half-medallion, standing on a *makara*, suggesting links with water. While one of her hands is raised, the other rests around the pelvic region. The affiliation with fertility is apparent from the presence of the rose and placement of the hand. Besides, lotuses and trees could also signify purity in Buddhism, adding another layer of symbolism to the image of the yakshis. Sudarshana is not known from any Buddhist literature, but a Sudarshana is mentioned in *Mahabharata*. While this linkage is dubious, it does point to the possibility of Buddhist and Brahmanical literature being drawn from similar sources.

Both yakshis are sculpted in sensuous poses, which emphasis their graceful bodies, curved hips and the pelvic region. In the context of the stupa, these seem out of place in a space visited by monks and nuns. Were they purposely placed as distractions to test the faith of worshippers? It is more likely that these were a result of the diverse sculptural programme established by the various patrons, who worshipped these yakshis as fertility deities. The *devatas* on the corner pillars are similarly very sensuous and have a fertility significance; stylistically, they are no different from the yakshis. In fact, identification of yakshis without labels is near impossible given the general similarity in the rendition of female forms.

### **Sanchi Stupa 1**

Stupa 1 stands on the summit of the Sanchi hill, 48 kilometres from the town of Bhopal. In ancient times, this hill was located at a juncture of important road and river routes.<sup>147</sup> Apart from Stupa 1, a number of other stupas, temples, buildings and monasteries are clustered on the hill to form the site of Sanchi. The monastic establishment of Sanchi likely survived from Mauryan times till 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, following which it was abandoned until it was

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<sup>145</sup> Refer to plate XXII, fig. 3 in Cunningham, *Stupa of Bharhut*.

<sup>146</sup> Refer to plate XXIII, fig. 2 in Cunningham, *Stupa of Bharhut*.

<sup>147</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 110-111.



rediscovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>148</sup> Different structures were added and reconstructed throughout the long history of site occupation.

The original brick stupa of stupa 1 was set up by emperor Ashoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to enshrine Buddha's relics. This was expanded in the latter half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE with the establishment of two stone balustrades, around the stupa and the entire site, four stone *toranas* at the cardinal points, and a circumambulatory path paved with stone slabs. The dome itself was encased in stone, and was topped with parasols and a *harmika* made of the same material. The additions expanded the size of the stupa to a diameter of 120 feet.<sup>149</sup>

The newel posts of the balustrade around the terrace are carved on three faces, while the other balusters have one complete and two half medallions on the outer face, sculptured with lotus and other floral and animal reliefs; the inner face consists of two half discs on the top and bottom, devoid of relief. The outer balustrade carries no adornment, while the pillars and architraves of the gateways are richly embellished with narrative and decorative carvings. The general sculptural programme emphasises the primacy of the Buddha, whose symbolic presence is centralised around worshippers and other motifs.<sup>150</sup>

### *Iconographic variations*

According to R.N. Misra, two distinct iconographic types of yakshas could be identified at Sanchi.<sup>151</sup> The first were the dwarfed and grotesque yakshas found as capitals of the western gateway. These he believed were a novel stylistic form, which inspired the figures of dwarf yakshas sculpted at Pitalkhora, Nagarjunakonda and Mathura. There might be some truth to this claim of iconographic adoption given the stylistic similarities in sculptures between sites.<sup>152</sup>

The second type were the “graceful figures of yakshas on the western and northern gates,” which were likely derived from the stone pillar yakshas of Bharhut.<sup>153</sup> It is possible that Misra is referring to the figures sculpted on the inner faces of both pillars of the *toranas*.<sup>154</sup> They play the role of *dvarapalas*, meant to keep evil and inauspicious elements from entering.

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<sup>148</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 111.

<sup>149</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 110-111.

<sup>150</sup> John Marshall, *A Guide to Sanchi* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1955), 37-38.

<sup>151</sup> Misra, *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*, 108.

<sup>152</sup> Misra, 108.

<sup>153</sup> Misra, 108.

<sup>154</sup> Refer to plates 36, 50, 52 and 66 in John Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II* (New Delhi: Swati Publications, 1983).

Considering the similarity with Bharhut yakshas, one might surmise that these sculptures followed the pattern of the Regents of the Four Directions. However, these figures look exactly alike, betraying no characteristics that can link them with the *lokapalas*; additionally, unlike Bharhut, there are no labels that can aid identification. Alternatively, certain scholars, who have argued for a Mahayana affiliation with the Sanchi stupa, have perceived the figures on the gateways as *bodhisattvas*, rather than *dvarapalas*. The Mahayana association is, however, unlikely given imprecatory inscriptions at the stupa, emphasising the personage of *arhat*, a being known from the Theravada school, but discredited in the Mahayana.<sup>155</sup>

Marshall argues that the figure holding flowers at the foot of the first stairway balustrade is a rudimentary sketch of the yakshas on the gateway pillars. A similar figure can be found alongside a yakshi underneath a lotus creeper on another railing pillar.<sup>156</sup>

### *Gateway sculptures*

The gateways are richly carved with figures and motifs often allied with yakshas, including trees, lotus and other flower motifs, elephants, *makaras*, lions, etc. While the inner faces of the southern gateway pillars are lost, one can find guardian yaksha figures<sup>157</sup> on either pillar of the remaining gateways. I find a connection between these yakshas and fertility, given the presence of symbols like the mango tree, bignonia flowers, *utpala* flowers or lotuses around them. These figures more or resemble each other given the common top-knot and similar attire. In this, they also tend to look like the genii figures standing on top of the northern gateway, and in three uprights between the architraves. These can then make up one type of yaksha figures depicted at Stupa 1, although one needs to note the lack of inscriptions, and also that many other male figures possess the same form.

The wheel centred atop the northern gateway is flanked on both sides by a yaksha carrying a fly-whisk in one hand and a purse in the other.<sup>158</sup> A similar triad is found between the second and third architraves, where one sees a wheel on a capital in the centre, and a yaksha with a lotus bud on either side.<sup>159</sup> Misra argues that since the *chauri* was a symbol drawn from a vocabulary of social referents and had meaning within the context of a political, courtly setting, the use of these *chauri*-bearing yaksas casted the Buddha in the role of a worldly monarch. The

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<sup>155</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 111.

<sup>156</sup> Refer to plate 8, fig. d and e in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

<sup>157</sup> See note 25.

<sup>158</sup> Refer to plate 22 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

<sup>159</sup> Refer to plate 23, fig. (a) in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

visual affinity among yaksha, *chauri*, and *dharmachakra* implied a symbolic relationship of the realms of nature, polity, and religion.<sup>160</sup>

The lowest architrave of the southern gateway depicts a number of dwarfish pot-bellied figures surrounded by lotus stems and flowers.<sup>161</sup> A long stem emerges from the mouth of one of these creatures at one end of the lintel and ends in the mouth of the another at the other end. One can identify them as yakshas given their similarity with the Bharhut medallion yakshas. Similar figures can be found at the foot of the west pillar of this gate<sup>162</sup>; the west face of the pillar carries the image of a yaksha-like being, from whose navel emerges a lotus stalk. Marshall and Foucher have, however, identified these creatures as *kumbhandas*, who were another set of subsidiary beings in Buddhism.

Stylistically, these dwarfish figures were different from the images that made up the capitals of the western gateway<sup>163</sup>, especially in the attire and head gear. The latter more closely resemble the demons of Mara as seen on the lintel identified as portraying Mara and his army on the northern gateway. The capitals are made up of four squatting figures, facing outwards, on either pillar of the *toranas*. These too have been identified as *kumbhandas*, but given their similarity with the Atlantes figures at Bharhut, it is likely that they are representations of yakshas.

### *Lokapalas*

Some scholars believe that the *lokapala* mythology in Buddhist texts was visually translated in the Sanchi reliefs. This suggests the presence of Kubera, one of the *lokapalas*, in the reliefs of Sanchi. The four figures at the foot of the Bodhi tree on the southern pillar of the eastern gateway have been identified as *lokapalas* by Marshall and Foucher, although they cannot be independently distinguished. Marshall is quite certain that the kings along with their retinue seen worshipping a wheel on the top panel of the west pillar of the Southern gateway represent the *lokapalas*. Similar worship by the *lokapalas* can be seen on the front face of the west pillar. Additionally, they might have been depicted on the lower panels of the north pillar, which possibly shows the seven heavens. On the north end of the western gate, the viewer can spot four alms bowls being presented by the four Guardians of the World. Marshall states that

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<sup>160</sup> Misra, *Yaksha cult and iconography*, 19.

<sup>161</sup> Refer to plate 11 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

<sup>162</sup> Refer to plate 19, fig. b in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

<sup>163</sup> Refer to plate 57 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

“whenever there are four worshipping noblemen, we are entitled to think of the Four Guardians of the World.”<sup>164</sup>

### *Female figures*

A female figure serves as an ornamental bracket between the eastern *torana* pillar and the lowest architrave.<sup>165</sup> She stands underneath a mango tree with one arm and leg wrapped around the trunk, while the other arm draws a branch towards her. The figure is made sensuous and curvaceous, reminiscent of the corner pillar yakshis found at Bharhut. Additionally, she is clothed in a transparent garment, meant to reveal the graceful form.

Dehejia argues that this motif drew from the pan-Indian belief of the woman as auspicious because of her association with fertility, and was brought into the cultural programme by the patrons. The link of this bracket with the blossoming tree further asserts her fertility connotation as a *vrikshaka*. Given the similarity in form with the Bharhut yakshis that have inscriptions, this female figure can be classified as a yakshi.

The yakshi on the other side of the gateway is now lost, although fragments of the feet and bangled hand holding onto the tree are visible. A smaller yakshi with a mango tree can be found between the ends of the first and second architrave.<sup>166</sup> Similar yakshi dryads adorn the northern gateway as well on either side.<sup>167</sup> Here, one hand of the figure holds the branch while the other rests around the pelvic region, evoking associations with fertility.

These yakshi figures resemble certain other female figures. It is often difficult to distinguish the figure of Maya from that of a yakshi, or independently identify the couples depicted on various reliefs.<sup>168</sup> At one corner of the relief of Mara and his demons, next to the indexical sign of Buddha, is a female figure bearing a plate and water jug, identified by some scholars as Sujata carrying food for the Buddha. However, the pose in which she is depicted resembles that of the *vrikshaka*, implying that the depiction could be that of a yakshi paying homage to the Buddha. The confusion arises because of the similarity in the rendition of yakshis and general female devotees, although yakshis are unfailingly sculpted in more sensuous poses, which is not always the case with other female figures.

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<sup>164</sup> Refer to plates 52, 18 and 58 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi Vol II*.

<sup>165</sup> Refer to plate 38 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

<sup>166</sup> Refer to plate 43 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

<sup>167</sup> Refer to plates 26, 27 and 30 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol II*.

<sup>168</sup> Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi*, 175.

## Sanchi stupa 2

According to Dehejia, the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE saw a shift to the use of stone in building Buddhist structures. Stupa 2, located on a terrace half-way up the western slope of the Sanchi hill, was the first monument to be built following this development. This stupa enshrined the relics of ten *arhats*, i.e. individuals who had gained enlightenment within the Theravada tradition. The stupa (50 feet in diameter) itself was of brick, but the circumambulatory path, the stairway, the railings, and the *harmika* were cut from stone. No *toranas* were found embellishing the entrances.<sup>169</sup> While the balustrades of the stairway, berm and *harmika* possess certain decorations, I will focus on the outer railing which portrays various subjects like events of Buddha's life, symbols of the lotus, wheel, and stupa, and figures of yakshas, nagas, animals, etc.

### *Female figures*

The *vrikshaka* motif finds its presence in this stupa as well, in the form of a female figure hugging a bignonia tree with her right arm.<sup>170</sup> She is standing on a lotus, and is pulling the branch of the tree with her other hand. These associations with fertility make her classification as a yakshi plausible, and she has been identified as such by both Marshall and Dehejia. There are other instances of women with trees, and it is safe to classify them as yakshis given this association.

The figure of these yakshis resembles the figure of Maya, who is usually flanked by two elephants, recreating the scene of Nativity. However, the stupa also carries reliefs of individual women, without elephants or trees, and here it is difficult to identify them as either Maya or a yakshi. In fact, there is a uniformity in the form of all female figures, whether divine, semi-divine or mortal. It is interesting to note how the women are often surrounded by fertility motifs like flowers or trees, reiterating the idea of the woman as auspicious in Buddhist art.

A horse-headed female<sup>171</sup> carrying a man has been identified as a yakshi by Dehejia and Marshall, as a portrayal of the Padakusalamanava *jataka*. However, it is important to consider Zin's argument in this case that points to the dangers of linking uninscribed images with Pali

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<sup>169</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 75-76.

<sup>170</sup> Refer to plate 74, fig. 1a in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>171</sup> Refer to plate 90, fig. 86b in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

literature. The image can be interpreted differently, as by Maurizio Taddei, who leaves the horse-headed woman unidentified.<sup>172</sup>

### *Male figures*

The identification of human figures on stupa 2 is a task, given the similarity in forms, and the lack of inscriptions. For instance, the inner face of the northeast corner pillar depicts six figures, two of which uphold a *triratna* symbol.<sup>173</sup> These have been identified by Dehejia as yakshas, and there is a possibility given their pot-bellied Atlantes stature as seen in Bharhut. The male figure below them differs from them stylistically. A figure raising one hand with a similar form is found on the middle medallion of another pillar, and has been identified by Marshall as a yaksha. However, Marshall also identifies a yaksha on another medallion, wearing a peculiar head-dress.<sup>174</sup> The form of the figure here differs, and the classification is based on his presence amidst lotuses, a sign of fertility. Yet again, another figure, resembling the male on the corner pillar in form and posture, has been identified by Marshall as a yaksha.<sup>175</sup>

My observation of the figures at stupa 2 leads me to conclude that there are three styles in which standing male figures were sculpted. The first include the pot-bellied figures, with one or both hands raised. The second include the more slender male figures standing with one knee bent, wearing a *dhoti* and a top-knot. The third, of which I have found only one specimen, is the figure with the peculiar head-dress. Of these, the first can be classified as yakshas drawing from their similarity with Bharhut sculptures. Since stupa 2 was completed earlier, Bharhut sculptures might have been later adaptations. Classifying the second variety is more complicated as it was used to depict both yakshas and male devotees, who cannot otherwise be differentiated. Additionally, this difficulty in classifying male and female figures complicates the identification of the couples who are depicted time and again.

### **Sanchi stupa 3**

Standing 50 yards from stupa 1, stupa 3, made of sandstone, enshrined the relics of Buddha's disciples, Sariputta and Mogallana. Contemporary with the rebuilding of the stupa 1, this stupa

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<sup>172</sup> Vidya Dehejia, *Unseen Presence: The Buddha and Sanchi* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1996), 79.

<sup>173</sup> Refer to plate 74, fig. 1c in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>174</sup> Refer to plate 75, fig. 9a in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>175</sup> Refer to plate 75, fig. 6a in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

resembles stupa 1 in form. The ground balustrade has been destroyed, and what remains is a single *torana* at the south entrance in front of the relic mound.<sup>176</sup>

The pillars of this gateway carry two *dvarapala* figures<sup>177</sup>, who resemble the stupa 1 *dvarapalas* in posture and attire, and can hence, be identified as guardian yakshas. They hold floral motifs, evoking the association with fertility. The capitals of the pillars are made up of dwarfish figures<sup>178</sup> which resemble the western gateway capitals at stupa 1; the similarity allows the classification of these figures as yakshas.

The dwarf and lotus image seen at stupa 1 and Bharhut is portrayed on two lintels of the top and bottom architraves.<sup>179</sup> Given the absence of inscriptions, it is difficult to classify them as either yakshas or *kumbhandas*. The middle lintel showcases a group of fighters amidst lotus foliage<sup>180</sup>, and Marshall identifies these figures, carrying swords and trays, as yakshas. These figures are not seen anywhere else in Sanchi or Bharhut, and the basis of this identification is unclear.

The general depiction of standing male and female figures is uniform; they either have folded hands or are offering something to the Buddha. Marshall seems to identify a couple on the bottom lintel<sup>181</sup> as the yaksha couple of Panchika and Hariti, mentioned in Buddhist texts, although they look exactly like the other worshippers. A horse-headed woman<sup>182</sup> is seen with a man on the same lintel, and she is identified by Marshall as the yakshi found on stupa 2.

## Conclusions

As the earliest models of Buddhist art, the stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut employed a sculptural programme that was, as Dehejia argues, “Indian in character,” in that it used motifs that went beyond religion to be used in Hindu, Buddhist and secular sculptures alike. The presence of these reliefs that included figures of yakshas, yakshis, nagas, and symbols like lotuses, elephants, *makaras*, etc, was a likely result of the diverse choices of patrons, some of whom might have converted to Buddhism from local cults. If the larger extant sculptures act as evidence for independent worship, the rendition of yakshas on stupas was a sign of their position within Buddhism. The picture we get was that they were meant to be seen as

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<sup>176</sup> Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, 132.

<sup>177</sup> Refer to plate 103, fig. c and d in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>178</sup> Refer to plate 97 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>179</sup> Refer to plates 96 and 100 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>180</sup> Refer to plate 100 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>181</sup> Refer to plate 96 in Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi: Vol III*.

<sup>182</sup> See note above.

subordinate to the Buddha, although in some cases, it is possible they were added as mere decorative reliefs.

Certain common forms which can be identified as yakshas are visible across Bharhut and Sanchi. The first include the *vrikshaka* figures, which, although absent at Stupa 3, reveal a certain association with fertility, and can be taken as representations of yakshis, who were traditionally fertility divinities. Similarly, variations of the *dvarapala* figures are found at both sites. The Bharhut inscriptions allows us to label these figures as yakshas, using which we can classify other figures with similar forms as yakshas. I contend that the second variety of male figures I identified at stupa 2 inspired the form of the guardian yakshas at Bharhut, which then influenced a particular style of yakshas at stupas 1 and 3, as seen on pillars, on top of the architrave and on uprights. The dwarf Atlantes figures are also popularly sculpted, and there is some basis to their identification as yakshas. The *dvarapala* and the Atlantes yakshas suggest they were relegated the tasks of protecting and supporting within Buddhism. The presence of floral motifs also reiterates the yaksha association with fertility.

Yakshas were not the only subordinate beings within Buddhist mythology. This is what makes it difficult to classify certain figures, like the dwarfs in foliage, as they could have been representations of other beings like *naras*, *kumbhandas*, etc, especially given the lack of inscriptions. On the question of identification, there is also the problem of differentiating supernatural and mortal figures, when male and female figures are styled more or less uniformly. Finally, while equating reliefs with Pali literature makes the reading of stupa iconography exciting, it needs to be reiterated that sculpture often transcended Pali literature, which was not only compiled later but was also unlikely to have documented the myriad experiences and practices of worshippers on ground.



## CONCLUSION

This thesis has studied the representation of yakshas and yakshis in the *Mahabharata* and on the stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi. In both cases, what is evident is the attempt at assimilating these local divinities into the Brahmanical or Buddhist fold, suggesting the inherent popularity of the yakshas as a local cult.

The *Mahabharata* spells certain shifts from preceding perceptions of yakshas in Brahmanical literature. For one, yakshas acquire more concrete tangible forms, transcending their previous rendition as invisible or abstract. The Epic relegates them a lesser position, whereby they are no longer responsible for the creation of the universe, and are also prone to mortality, unlike their earlier immortal selves. Furthermore, these semi-divine beings are seen as worshipping other deities, like Krishna, and are styled as attendants of the gods, whereby they are called upon to fight for or protect them. Kubera seems to be the only exception to the case, in that he is both a yaksha and a divinity; the addition of this figure might have been one way to appease and attract worshippers of the local cult of yakshas.

These simultaneous processes of assimilation and appeasement are also evident in how these beings were popularly worshipped in the *Mahabharata*. They were imbued a dual personality, whereby they were both revered and feared by humans; in a way, the former quality attracted followers, while the latter contained the yakshas within the Brahmanical mythology. The qualities of yakshas and other demi-gods were often confused, but the former were always placed on a higher moral ground, possibly as a manner of conciliation. My observations reveal that the *Mahabharata* was continually working to craft a yaksha image that drew from both its status as a local deity, and from earlier Vedic traditions. Hence, while the yakshas retained their position as fertility deities by being associated with trees, they also maintained the Vedic connection with water through their residence in tanks.

Since the *Mahabharata* was both a religious and a narrative text, the yakshas also had a functional role in relaying the story. They were used as instruments to establish the moral qualities of epic heroes. Additionally, they became the route to linking the celestial, terrestrial and subterranean worlds. Studying the yakshas within *Mahabharata* is an exciting endeavour as the Epic yields a thorough portrayal of the yakshas, in both their qualities and capabilities, although there are certain lags in comprehension. What is unclear is why the physical appearance of the yakshas is so shrouded in mystery, especially given more comprehensive descriptions of other beings like rakshasas. Furthermore, there is very little emphasis on

yakshis, whose only quality highlighted is their beauty. These then form points of entry for further enquiry into the Epic conception of these semi-divine figures.

As opposed to the text of the *Mahabharata*, the identification of yakshas in the sculptural art of stupas stands on dubious ground. The only figures that can be identified as yakshas with any surety are the corner pillar sculptures at Bharhut that carry inscriptions. The lack of labels elsewhere leaves the viewer in uncertainty, and has even resulted in contradicting inferences by scholars. The uniformity in portrayal of figures, and the presence of numerous other semi-divine figures in Buddhist mythology who played similar functions, adds another angle to the confusion. Finally, there lies the possible incongruence between art and Pali literature, as raised by Monika Zin and Vidya Dehejia. This is not to say that every identification made by scholars so far is necessarily wrong, but employing Zin's approach of relying more on the pictorial tradition, and Dehejia's emphasis on oral traditions, does open up many new and exciting ways to study the iconography of yakshas, and stupa art in general.

Regardless, I have attempted to identify certain types of figures which could be classified as yakshas. The *vrikshaka* figures very likely represent yakshis, given their status as fertility deities before assimilation. Using Bharhut as the base, certain standing male figures, usually carrying out the role of protecting or guarding, can be classified as yakshas. Finally, the Atlantes dwarfs make up the third style in which yakshas were sculpted. My approach has been to understand how yakshas were perceived within the Buddhist tradition through the relief art on stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi. This is of course not the only way to survey the iconography of yakshas. It would be interesting to see an art historical analysis of yakshas that transcends religious borders by including both the extant sculptures, which have uncertain religious associations, and other renditions, allied with certain religions.

My study of the representation of yakshas has underlined two ways in which the 'dead kingdom' of the yakshas can be revived. It reveals that the yakshas were not really forgotten but rather reimagined to suit the interests of the more established practices of Hinduism and Buddhism, whereby they eventually lost their standing as an independent cult. Conversely, it also shows how the development of a religion was shaped by popular beliefs, which impacted it in various ways. The addition of yaksha sculptures to stupas was not ordained by the Buddha, but was an addition from outsider patrons, later to be fully integrated into the religion. A similar story can be seen in early Brahmanism and Hinduism where the notion of worshipping yakshas was not especially important. Additionally, one can find commonalities between Brahmanical

and Buddhist myths about yakshas, suggesting that they drew from a common source. Finally, the thesis points to certain patterns of memorialisation, which allowed the yaksha cult to live on despite its loss of independent popularity. Committed to writing or immortalised in stone, the yakshas continue to be evoked, and an examination of this literature and art reminds us of the palpable force exerted by this individual cult once upon a time.

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